Events After JFK Assassination Detailed

Johnson Sought to Calm Nation, Retain Staff, Transcripts Show

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In the first days after John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson worked to keep the country calm and retain the slain president's staff, according to recently released transcripts of White House conversations in November and December that year.

The day after the Nov. 22 assassination, Johnson tried to set the time for a speech to a joint session of Congress, but had to delay planning it until the Kennedy family completed the funeral plans. The funeral was held Monday, Nov. 25.

In a Nov. 23 phone conversation with House Speaker John McCormack (D-Mass.), a friend of the Kennedys, Johnson said he wanted to give his speech "Tuesday if I can, except for the [Kennedy] family."

Later in the conversation Johnson said, "I can't sit still, I've got to keep the government going. I met with the Cabinet this afternoon, we've got the budget to resolve next week. But I don't want the family to feel that I am having any lack of respect, so I have a very delicate wire to walk there."

McCormack replied that Johnson should "make your own decisions." But the speaker reminded him, "It *is* a delicate field for us all and you should respect the delicacy. . . . This is of paramount importance and gravity."

In a conversation two days later, the day of the funeral, Johnson told McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser, his reason for wanting to speak as soon as possible: "The securities exchange, commodity markets, etc. I'm a little worried about them tomorrow—you know what they did—they dropped after [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower's heart attack, so that's the main reason we really wanted to speak Tuesday, hoping we could really hold them."

After the funeral, Johnson called Lawrence F. O'Brien, who had been Kennedy's White House liaison with Congress, to ask him to stay on "because I need you a lot more than he did."

When O'Brien responded by asking if Johnson had some "immediate problem," the new president said he just wanted O'Brien "to know how strongly I felt about you and Ken [Kenneth O'Donnell, Kennedy's top administrative aide] and the rest of the staff."

"I don't expect you to love me as much as you did him," Johnson went on, "but I expect you will after we've been around awhile." O'Brien did, in fact, stay on to become close to Johnson and manage his 1964 campaign for president.

One of the first decisions Johnson faced was whether to push a new tax bill or a new civil rights bill in the closing weeks of 1963.

At 10 p.m. on the day of the funeral, Johnson was told by Theodore Sorensen, who was Kennedy's top White House policy adviser and speechwriter, that the late president "tentatively decided . . . to move civil rights before taxes."

Johnson, who wanted to go with taxes first, responded that if civil rights went first, "you won't have a tax bill for four months, my friend."

They then discussed drafts for Johnson's speech to the joint session of Congress two days later.

"[Treasury Secretary C. Douglas] Dillon says we've got to have a sentence on being frugal and thrifty," Johnson said, "and at least talk like we're going to watch expenditures."

He criticized the draft's setting of a date for civil rights and tax bills. "I think we just ought to urge the Congress to pass them. I think if we have a given date, we're going to fall on our face. I think they'll say the Kennedy program was defeated and next Johnson is repudiated."

Sorenson asked the president what he thought of speech material written by Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith.

"I didn't think it was any ball of fire," Johnson replied. "I thought it was something that you could improve on . . . a bunch of general statements but I liked the compassion of it . . . but I think a much better speech could be written. I'm expecting you to write a better one."

In the end, Johnson rejected most of what Sorensen provided.

The week after the funeral, Clark M. Clifford, the Washington lawyer who was close to both Johnson and the Kennedy family, was given the task of talking Robert F. Kennedy into remaining attorney general and a member of the Johnson Cabinet. Robert Kennedy had opposed his brother's decision to offer Johnson the vice presidency and the two had frosty relations during the first three years of the Kennedy administration.

On Dec. 4, 1963, 12 days after the assassination, Clifford called Johnson and reported: "Mr. Pres-

ident, I've just finished a two-hour session with Bobby [Kennedy] and first I want to say . . . he's going to stay."

Clifford added that he wanted to discuss Robert Kennedy's decision with Johnson before Kennedy and the president got together.

"He's going to have a talk with you," Clifford said, "and I ought to have a talk with you first. It is a relationship that I think is exceedingly important and it is one that we ought to look at together."